

# THE HISTORICAL STORY FOR BOYS

*By*



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# THE HISTORICAL STORY FOR BOYS.

THREE factors compose the problem of the historical story for boys — the boy, the subject, and the book or the treatment of the subject.

*The Boy.* — One of the foremost sources of confusion in the appreciation of boy-nature is due to the fact that the genius instead of the normal boy is made the standard of judgment. Because certain geniuses in their boyhood read and enjoyed the masterpieces of literature, the conclusion is drawn that if other boys read the same great works they too will become geniuses. Mill might read Greek when he was nine, but it is a *non sequitur* to infer that if another boy is compelled to study the same marvelous language at the same early age he too can be made into a Stuart Mill. We are prone to spell "the child" with a capital C. Instead of rejoicing because our boys are not geniuses, but are healthy, normal young animals, we are prone to select their studies and elect their reading with the genius in view. We think we know what they ought to like, and then compel them to take



it whether they like it or not. We confuse food with appetite. In the opinion of certain teachers even the gems of literature, introduced and memorized in the grammar grades, sometimes more nearly serve as an emetic than as a diet, because they remain fixed in the memory of the child as a part of an imposed task.

Then, too, we confuse the production of a great writer with that of a wide reader. Reading, not writing, is the subject of the present paper. The course that has produced or aided in developing certain eminent writers is sometimes used as the standard for the development of extensive reading, whereas the two may be in nowise related. The food of one may be the poison of the other.

We all have our theories as to what is best for the boy — especially if we have no boys of our own. Who has not pitied the boy left to the care of a spinster aunt? Who has not sympathized from the depth of his soul with the child of specialists in child study? From our own more extensive experiences we are prone to read backward into boy life what is not there but exists only in our fancy or our dreams.

The normal boy is neither a prig nor a prodigy; he is just a healthy, noisy, shouting, singing young animal. His maiden aunt may have "certain ideas" as to what is proper,

but what does she understand? She has no children, but her confidence in her knowledge of children increases as the square of the distance from the probability of her ever having any. Her idea of deportment would make the lad into a priggish little old gentleman. Her conception of his proper garb, by comparison, would make a mummy dressed in the height of fashion. Often, too, her plan for his reading is fearfully and wonderfully made, just because she has thought of what ought to be in the boy instead of what is in the boy. If he is normal, he prefers Samson to Shelley, and Jeffries to Swinburne. He would rather tell of the pitchers in the national league than hear of the virtues of the wise. He may be interested in the artistic touch in Rossetti's Blessed Damosel, but the chances are he prefers a "damosel" who may be less blessed, but at least she is of flesh and blood and can readily distinguish the duties of the umpire from those of the short-stop.

All this does not imply that the young barbarian is to be left in his barbarous tastes for reading or for food. It does imply that he cannot be lifted bodily into a literary light. Jonah's precipitate departure from his unique conveyance is an act of grace compared with such a transference of young readers. Cod liver oil is most excellent, but, Mark Twain to the contrary, it is not to be classified with

breakfast foods. What is sometimes termed "cultivating a taste" is often really cloying an appetite. What the boy is and does and likes cannot wisely be ignored. Sermons, provided they are safe, sound, and not too long, are most commendable (perhaps it is safe to assert that more are commended than heard), but the normal boy does not begin his churchly career with an over-enthusiastic delight in this means of grace. It is better to put the yeast into the bread before the bread is put into the boy.

*The Boy's Demands.*—The normal boy demands a story. Sermons may be better, but not for him. The Bible does not open with a scientific disquisition upon the evolutionary hypothesis of anthropological origins—it begins with the story of Adam and Eve. Even the Great Teacher did not speak without a parable. This is the law of life. It is more, it is as vital as breathing.

In his story the boy demands action. He wants no involved plot, no introspective analysis. "Something doing" is more than slang, it is a demand. For him the tale is not adorned by an implied or appended moral. He wants no tail to his tale. Even when the boy is quiet he wants his heroes to be doing things. Now this is the secret of the appeal of such books as "Deadwood Dick" and



"Slim Sam the Sleuth." I am not condoning the reading of these terrible tales. I am claiming only that the philosophy of their appeal shall not be ignored.

"Is it true?" This question is one of the foremost in the boy's category. Fairy tales or Arabian Nights may be read by him and enjoyed, but they are not masquerading. Truly they are lies, and the young reader is content. But there is to be no sailing under false colors. The story must be true to life, but not too good to be true.

It must appeal to his imagination. He may not be able to define this demand, but it is as real as his hunger, although he may be unable to name one of his digestive organs beyond his stomach. The appeal of the book must be based upon what he comprehends, but it must be also a little beyond him. This is the reason why stories of life in boarding-school are more popular than those of public schools, of college life than of day schools. Even his response to the mock heroics of scalping Indians is based upon this fact. The boy is a natural hero-worshipper and his heroes are mainly those of his own land. He is intense in his patriotism and a lover of war because war is a time when heroes are made and things are done. In a large class of newsboys in one of our greatest cities, Washington was voted the most popu-

lar character of history, Napoleon was second choice.

*The Historical Story.* — That the historical story does appeal to boys, statistics prove. At first, it is true, it may not find a response so immediate as that given the book which deals with a special interest at the time, like football or athletics, but for a steady and continued interest it easily leads. An investigation in one of our largest city libraries was recently conducted in the following manner: a slip of paper was handed each boy as he entered and he was requested to write the titles of six books recently read and most enjoyed. Of thirty-five boys who responded, seventeen placed an historical story first in the list. Some books appeal for a time; the historical story appeals for all time. Fifteen years after its publication a certain historical story was reported at the head of the juvenile books most in demand at the New York City public libraries.\* The vitality of this class of stories for boys is apparently pronounced.

The cause is not difficult to find. Whether there be athletics, the rules of the game change; whether there be stories of school life, the buildings crumble and new generations of boys appear on the campus; but

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\* "The Search for Andrew Field," First Volume of "War of 1812 Series," by Everett T. Tomlinson.

history never faileth. It contains the elements of the permanent, the heroic, the patriotic, the vital, which are eternal. Washington is never out of date. Pontiac and Tecumseh do not pass from the stage. Farragut and Perry are not vanishing figures. Plymouth Rock is a foundation not easily shaken. But the book must be more than a record of events, it must contain action ; not mere facts but a story. It does not glorify war but it magnifies the heroic and the lessons taught by victory or defeat. Indeed, all true history is a record of war. It is the story of man's contest with nature, with men, and with himself. It places a value upon the liberties of the present by teaching the price that was paid for them — for the historical story is not merely one of adventure but also of that which is heroic, patriotic, historic, true. The influx of peoples who have no comprehension of the price paid for liberty in America intensifies the value of stories that deal with national foundations. In my own State of New Jersey fifty-two per cent of its inhabitants are of foreign birth.

*The Treatment of the Subject.* — The historical story must be more than a recital of facts ; it must make actions and actors vital and vivid. It is historical without being mere history. Its setting must be in verified facts ;



the story is of action. It is personal rather than biographical. Indeed this is the universal demand of editors as well as of boys to-day. The book must recognize the fundamental requirements of the boy that it be true, interesting, and instructive ; but the instruction must be like a skeleton — covered with flesh and blood. Only lobsters and similar creatures have their bones outside their meat. The highest purpose of the historical story is served when it becomes the vestibule through which the young reader, boy or girl, — for girls read these stories almost as much as boys do — enters into the spacious abode of history itself.

*Methods of Preparation.* — Perhaps I may be pardoned and my object will not be misunderstood if, in discussing the final phase of the subject, I reveal some of the methods employed in the preparation of these books. Given the desire to prepare for boys and girls certain books which shall be inspirational, but introductory and preparatory rather than final, which shall be instructive, wholesome, interesting, true in the lessons they imply and teach, and yet shall be looked upon only as steps to higher planes both in literature and history, what laws must be observed?

1. The book must be written by a lover of boys. There can be no divorce between the

lover of history and the lover of boys. If one does not look upon the normal, healthy boy as the most fascinating object in creation let him avoid the task as he would shun poison. The love of the story *and* of the boy are as essential as the love of history. The facility of the story-teller may be developed but it never can be implanted.

2. The historical material used must be verified and every place described must have been actually seen. The psychological gulf between what one has seen and what one knows only by hearsay is unconsciously detected and is as impassable and fixed as that which separated Dives from Lazarus.

3. It is the boy's point of view which must be held steadily before the writer. His own may perhaps be wiser, but it cannot be substituted. In my own labors I have endeavored to keep constantly in touch with the boys themselves. Certain manuscripts or chapters are put to the actual test of the boy's judgment before the copy is sent to the publishers. A frequent method adopted has been for my wife to read aloud to my own boys, while I sat in an adjoining room unobserved, but not unobserving, listening to comments, and, above all, watching for manifestations of interest or disapproval. The experience of librarians, the knowledge of clerks in stores where books are sold, watching



boys at their games, listening to their own comments, their judgment as expressed in letters written to the authors are all supplementary aids of great value.

4. The questions and personal experiences of boys are suggestive because the boy's point of view must never be ignored. For example, in gathering the material for certain historical stories, my own boys, lads at the time, scoured the regions with me. Battlefields were visited, the routes of the armies followed, the "oldest inhabitants" were talked with and many an unpublished tale of early days run down. Questions the writer would never have thought of asking were asked by the boys with a result that was both interesting and suggestive.

5. Old newspapers, old books, scrap-books, family records have provided valuable material which no history has ever recorded. When it is known that a man is interested in special lines the world combines to aid him. "Unto every one that hath shall be given." A scrap-book compiled by an early commander at Sackett's Harbor, a true story of an ancestor who swam across Lake Champlain just before the attack on Ticonderoga, the personal records of one who for two years was a prisoner on the old prison-ship Jersey, the diary of men who participated in the Tea Party at Greenwich, N.J., in 1775, the early

printed tales of adventures with the pine robbers and with the son of Ben Franklin, the last royal governor of New Jersey, have been among the valuable gifts thus received.

6. The search is for the true and the valuable set in that which is interesting ; for the informing, but without losing sight of the inspiring ; for the stirring and unusual, but not for the improbable. The story, it is true, later may be read for its own sake, but, even as a story, the historical tale has failed of its highest purpose unless it arouses and stimulates interest in that which lies beyond its borders. The historical story should be the connecting, though frequently missing, link between the boy and the history of his own land. It may not develop a genius, but it may do better still, it may arouse admiration for a true man. It may not, indeed ought not to, glorify the battlefield ; but it may assist in cultivating courage, devotion to ideals, and, above all, a true estimate and proper valuation of what his heritage as an American is. In other ways and in different contests, by his reading the tales of his forefathers' days and deeds, he may be inspired to hold up those principles which they at cost of life and limb so worthily upheld. " I, too, am an American and a citizen of no mean country ! "



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